

# School refusal

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School can be overwhelming and distressing for some autistic children. It's important to remember that while the term 'school refusal' sounds like a child is just being stubborn, more often children who refuse to attend school are doing so because school is so frustrating, overwhelming, or upsetting that it feels impossible to cope with. Once a child has reached this stage, attending school anyway is not helpful – they are not able to learn anything until the problem/s are resolved.

This resource will outline some of the common reasons autistic children may be unwilling or unable to attend school, some strategies for handling these, and some options for when school isn't working.

## What school refusal can look like

Some children will be able to communicate what's going wrong at school; some may not have the vocabulary or maturity to explain exactly why they can't go to school, but will be able to say that they don't want to go any more; and others may express their inability to attend school in other ways.

Some signs to look out for include:

- Claiming to feel sick every morning (particularly if the sickness is never present on weekends or holidays and disappears if the child is allowed to stay home)
- Hiding in bed or being very reluctant to get up on school mornings (this is normal behaviour for teenagers, but in younger children may be a sign that something is wrong at school)
- Trouble sleeping on school nights
- Increased meltdowns or anxious stimming on school days, particularly just before and just after school.

## Common reasons for school refusal

If your child is struggling to attend school for any reason, it can really help to talk about it and come up with solutions together. If your child is not capable of a full discussion, whether due to age or ability, you can try asking them if they like different aspects of the school day, like lunchtime, schoolwork, being with other children, etc., or if different parts of school are easy or hard.

### Bullying

Autistic children are commonly bullied by their peers. This can include physical bullying, verbal insults, being isolated or ostracised, or a combination of these.

Some strategies to try if your child is being bullied:

- Talk to their teacher/s. Teachers may be able to stop bullying when they see it.
- Find your child a safe space within the school. This might mean getting them special permission to go to the library or stay in their classroom during lunch and breaks; letting them leave school grounds when they aren't in class (for older children); or finding another space that works for your child and their school.

## **Difficulty with schoolwork**

If your child has co-occurring conditions like a learning disability or ADHD, they may be finding schoolwork difficult and frustrating. As children get older and start to notice their own abilities in relation to their peers, being behind in school becomes humiliating as well as frustrating.

Some strategies if your child is struggling academically:

- Investigate whether you can get funding for a teacher aide to help out in the classroom. You can find more information about this process and other options for funding and support here: <https://www.education.govt.nz/school/student-support/special-education/>
- Some children benefit from repeating a school year; however, if your child already feels embarrassed about not being able to keep up with their peers, this may make it worse. Talk to your child about whether they feel that repeating a year would help them or not.

## **Bad relationships with teachers**

Autistic children can often be unintentionally blunt, rude, or insulting, which can lead to conflict with teachers who don't understand that the child didn't mean to be hostile. This sort of relationship with a teacher can be intensely frustrating for autistic children, who often don't understand why their teacher seems to dislike them, or why they are frequently in trouble when they haven't intentionally misbehaved.

- If your child's school is big enough, look into having them change classes.
- Suggest that the teacher gets some professional development around autism – for example, Autism New Zealand's Tilting the Seesaw for Teams course. (You can find more information about Tilting the Seesaw for Teams along with Autism New Zealand's other education programmes here: [https://autismnz.org.nz/programmes/?\\_programme\\_category=family-whanau](https://autismnz.org.nz/programmes/?_programme_category=family-whanau))

## **Sensory overwhelm**

Schools are loud, and often have a lot of visual input for children to process. For some autistic children, the constant barrage of sensory input is too much, and school is difficult or impossible to tolerate.

If your child is overwhelmed by sensory input at school:

- Have a quiet space or room in the school where your child can go when they are overwhelmed. This should be a space with minimal noise and visual input, where children know that they will not be interrupted or asked to do anything until they are ready.
- Talk to your child's teacher about allowing them extra breaks throughout the school day. For older children, this could mean going for a walk around the school at set times during the day; for younger children it could mean sitting in a quiet corner in the classroom.
- Look into switching to a smaller school, and/or one without modern learning environments (modern learning environments are open-plan classrooms, with two or more classes doing activities in the same space – they often contain up to 100 children and several teachers at once).
- Keep your child home from activities that are likely to be particularly intense, e.g. sports days, swimming lessons, school trips or camps, etc.

## **Social exhaustion**

School requires complex social interaction – shifting between the appropriate way to talk to teachers vs. peers; navigating different social groups in class and on the playground; balancing focussing on teacher instructions and focussing on peer interactions in class; and relearning social rules for each new school year as peers change and mature. For some autistic children, this is exhausting and overwhelming to the point where school seems impossible.

If social exhaustion is a problem for your child:

- Allow your child as much alone time and/or time with their special interests as possible outside of school.
- Look into whether your child can spend lunchtimes and/or breaks in the school library or another isolated space where they can have a break from socialising.

## **When school isn't working**

Having children in school from ages 6 to 16 years is a legal requirement in New Zealand. However, there are some options for children when mainstream school isn't working.

### **Te Kura (correspondence school)**

Te Kura is intended for primary and secondary-age students who cannot attend a physical school for various reasons, including the school environment being intolerable; having serious problems with peers or bullying; and being excluded from school.

You can find more information about Te Kura here:

<https://www.tekura.school.nz/>

## **Homeschooling**

Any parent of a child aged 5 to 16 can apply to homeschool their child. You must be able to prove that your child will be educated to the same standard as a registered school, and that they will attend lessons as regularly as they would in school.

You can find more information about homeschooling here:

<https://parents.education.govt.nz/primary-school/schooling-in-nz/home-education/>

## **Specialist schools**

For children with very high or complex needs, a specialist school may be the best option. Some of these schools have satellite units in mainstream schools, so that children can attend both, and some have itinerant teachers who can offer specialist support to children enrolled in mainstream schools.

Specialist schools have different requirements and services; to find out whether a specialist school would work for your child, contact the school directly. You can find a list of specialist schools here:

<https://parents.education.govt.nz/learning-support/primary-school-learning-support/special-schools/>